

# The Beaconsfield mine disaster and the evolution of chequebook journalism

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## **Abstract**

*Using the reporting of the 2006 Beaconsfield mine disaster in Tasmania as a case study, this paper explores the changing nature of chequebook journalism and the shift towards the consumerist model of entertainment news in Australia. The paper argues that the media's coverage of the disaster was a major turning point in the evolution of chequebook journalism in Australia. The moment miner Todd Russell, one of two survivors from the disaster, asked then-Channel 9 CEO Eddie McGuire to "tell me how big your chequebook is" on national television in response to a question about an exclusive interview, chequebook journalism was outed. Seldom before in Australia had a member of the public been so up-front about their monetary value to the media.*

## **Introduction**

"Tell me how big your chequebook is and we'll talk." The moment miner Todd Russell, the big affable hero of the 2006 Beaconsfield mine disaster, uttered those words in response to then-Channel 9 CEO Eddie McGuire's question about an exclusive interview on the nationally televised program *The Footy Show*, chequebook journalism was outed. It was the first time in Australia that a member of the public had, on national television, been so up-front about their monetary value to the media. The audience's response to Russell's brazen question to the then most powerful man in Australian television was enthusiastic applause. There was much clapping and cheering from the audience, who sensed that for once one of the little people held the power over the media.

Beaconsfield is thus a turning point in the evolution of chequebook journalism in Australia, and this article uses the reporting of the Beaconsfield disaster as a case study to explore both the changing nature of chequebook journalism and the shift towards the consumerist model of entertainment news in this country. Drawing on a range of media sources from both print and

television, the article sources comments from media practitioners and commentators about the role of chequebook journalism from the time of the disaster to argue that Russell's casual request to McGuire created discomfort in the news media because it exposed a practice which hitherto had been operating quietly behind the scenes for almost 100 years. Australia's major commercial television stations, Channel 7 and Channel 9, openly bargained for the rights to the miners' story, and this negotiating became a news story in itself, exposing the extent to which chequebook journalism is accepted in commercial television in Australia.

It must be noted that, contrary to popular belief, the practice of chequebook journalism has been around for more than 90 years. When the Titanic sank in April 1912, Marconi International sent a wire to the nearest ship, the Olympic, on behalf of *The World* newspaper, which read:

Will pay you liberally for story of rescue Titanic passengers at any length for you to send earliest possible moment mention prominent persons. The World.

Chequebook journalism remains the clearest indication of the way news becomes another commodity (Avieson, 1992, pp. 44-50). Much like civil remedies for the law of torts, chequebook journalism places a monetary value on suffering, on injury, on life. It is thus of central importance to what American news critic Daniel Hallin terms journalism's "ambivalent identity", that precarious balance between "the public-interest culture of journalism and the culture of commodity-production" (Hallin, 1994, pp. 1, 4).

## Reporting Beaconsfield

It is common knowledge that the news media pay for stories in Australia as elsewhere, especially current affairs programs such as Channel 7's *Today Tonight* and Channel 9's *A Current Affair*, which both regularly engage in bidding wars to secure exclusive stories. For example, then-newly engaged Australian tennis champion Lleyton Hewitt and his fiancée Bec Cartwright received \$200,000 from *Today Tonight* for their story, while Channel 10 paid Douglas Wood (an Australian held hostage by Iraqi gunmen for seven weeks in 2005), a rumoured \$400,000 – regarded as the highest price ever paid by the Australian media for an exclusive interview at that time. Wood was reluctant to say much in his first press conference in June 2005, because he was saving his story for the highest bidder (which quickly emerged as Channel 10). But what Wood had been reluctant to say, Todd Russell had no qualms about saying a little under a year later at Beaconsfield. In no-nonsense fashion, Russell was brokering a deal on national television with then Channel 9 CEO Eddie McGuire; he was openly offering himself as a news commodity.

Media speculation about the miners' commercial value dominated the news discourse from the moment it was discovered on Sunday, April 30, 2006, that, five days after the rock fall at the Beaconsfield gold mine that killed their co-worker Larry Knight, miners Todd Russell and Brant Webb were still alive, trapped 1km underground.

As one report in *The Age* on June 4, 2006, was headlined: "The media circus brings on the television clowns: journalists flocking to cover trapped miners bring pandemonium to small town" (Cubby & McMahon, 2006). While newspapers traditionally set the agenda for news, the demand for blanket coverage of the rescue attempts displaced the print media, so it became television (and more particularly, morning news television) that established the direction of reporting for each day<sup>1</sup>. Crikey.com.au noted that "the Beaconsfield story really broke at the worst time for newspapers" (Simons, Newhouse & Crikey correspondents, 2006). Television's prominence was maintained through convergent technologies, such as the internet, where webcams kept a watchful eye over Beaconsfield on the *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight* Web pages. Twice this sense of visibility and playing to the voyeur was interrogated: once following the death from a heart attack of Channel 9 journalist Richard Carleton, where his colleagues screened his body from the

cameras (and the children at the scene) with blankets; and once when Carolyn Russell (Todd's wife) and friends filmed journalists via "Wombat Cam", turning the tables on the journalists, as it were, to provide a private video record for Todd of the interest he and Brant had generated (see Wright, 2006b, p. 304).

The print media were essentially playing second fiddle to an industry that could bring the whole drama into the living rooms of Australians, and print journalists were none too pleased at being displaced. Ben Cubby and Neil McMahon began their *Age* report: "When it was announced that a large boring machine was coming to Beaconsfield, residents could have been forgiven for asking: do we really need another one? David Koch and co. had been there for days" (Cubby & McMahon, 2006) They continued: "It's been a media circus in the tiny Tasmanian town, with round-the-clock coverage that has added little since the men were found alive on Sunday."

Cubby and McMahon also acknowledged that the print media were not in the bidding race for an exclusive interview, reporting speculation on what kind of media reception awaited trapped miners Russell and Webb. "It's going to be the hottest story of the year," one network source said, "and there is unanimity the men will join the rarefied few to be paid a six-figure sum for their tale." The story concluded with a mention of the most high-profile media consultant in the country, Harry M. Miller, who, readers were told, "still manages [Lindy] Chamberlain and [Stewart] Diver [who was rescued after being trapped for days under the rubble of a collapsed building caused by an avalanche at a ski resort in Australia in 1997] and who would surely love to add the Beaconsfield miners to his trophy cabinet" (Cubby & McMahon, 2006).

The frenzied bid to gain the Beaconsfield exclusive was in part the result of the fact that the competition between Channels 7 and 9 was particularly fierce at the time of the mine disaster (see below). Whoever won the rights to the exclusive interview with the miners was not only going to win the ratings war in that time-slot, but, more importantly, also attract advertising for the lead-in period as well as during the interview itself and confirm, once and for all, which network was "number one" for news and current affairs. As *crikey.com.au*'s Glenn Dyer argued, whoever secured the deal would see it as delivering traction, as getting attention, with Nine CEO McGuire seeing it as a way of getting people back to "watching us [Nine] again". "That's what it's all about, that's why there's millions of dollars at stake," argued Dyer (2006).

Dyer is a former Channel 9 reporter, and he closely followed the "chequebook chase at Beaconsfield". He reported on May 10, 2006, that McGuire was offering a staggering \$6 million for an exclusive interview with Channel 9. According to Dyer, "overseas interest in the story could swell that figure even further" (Tooth, 2006). Dyer also told ABC Radio National's *The Media Report* that he found it interesting that no-one had actually considered that the miners might want to do a deal with both networks. Why not give them each a bit of exclusivity, put some money into the pot for the two miners, for Larry Knight's widow and children and immediate family, and the rest go into a fund for the town? "If I was Nine or Seven, that's what I'd be trying to do." (Dyer in Tooth, 2006)

But Nine and Seven were each determined to take the prize for themselves. While Webb and Russell waited in agonisingly cramped confines 1km underground – and their families and friends anxiously awaited news of their rescue – the media pack was circling. When Russell and Webb were finally freed on Tuesday, May 9, they made the journey back to the surface of a changed world. "Above ground and into the glare of television lights the self-proclaimed 'two stars' of the Beaconsfield mine tragedy, Todd Russell and Brant Webb, have a 'story to tell and a story to sell', and are 'worth their weight in gold'," the ABC's Gerald Tooth reported (Tooth, 2006).

But putting a price on stories further problematises ideas of agenda-setting as it "clear[s] the air of competing issues ... [and] demand[s] rapt attention to the only legitimate event on society's agenda" (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 222). This creates problems when other stories that have

competing news values arise at the same time – such as the Torres Strait Island survival story (where a father, son and nephew survived 22 days at sea) and the Federal Budget, which both ran during Beaconsfield. That Beaconsfield distracted from these other stories indicates not only how precedence among news stories is determined, but also how the imperative to inform is ultimately subordinated to entertainment. Hirst puts this down to cultural, technological and racial demands – the “blanket” coverage of the Beaconsfield rescue, the relative inaccessibility of the Torres Strait castaways (being based at sea rather than land) and the fact Beaconsfield involved “two white boys from Tasmania” rather than “three brave Indigenous sailors from non-mainstream northern Australia” (Hirst, 2006). In a forthright editorial, Garry Linnell, editor of *The Bulletin* magazine, confirmed that Beaconsfield’s coverage was in direct proportion to the way “the media valued lives and stories”, going on to reduce news coverage to a series of equations, where one white Australian life is worth several thousand African ones. This was not, he assured his readers, based in racism but “on [the] interest level of [the] Australian public” (Linnell, 2006, p. 8).

Journalist Margaret Simons described the decision to cover Beaconsfield rather than the Budget as a choice between “the money or the miracle” (Simons, Newhouse & Crikey correspondents, 2006). While clearly an important story, the Budget lacked “the elements” of Beaconsfield, what Channel 7 news director Peter Meakin referred to as “the bittersweet story” (quoted in Meade, 2006). Once again, Simons saw this as a significant change in the role of print media following the introduction of online news. “More than ever,” Simons concluded, “(P)eople are looking to papers for *depth*, rather than *news*.” (Simons, Newhouse & Crikey correspondents, 2006, emphasis added). Beaconsfield thus highlights the ways in which newspapers are increasingly becoming adjuncts to television and online. The “newness” or “currency” of news becomes the province of the electronic media, with the print media left to fill in the details, offer perspectives and provide background. In this case, Channel 7, through its morning infotainment program *Sunrise*, was the first to break the news that the miners were out.

In a blaze of camera lights the two miners emerged, arms outstretched triumphantly, and were led to waiting ambulances where the media pack circled. According to journalist Tony Wright, before Russell had even come out of the mine he had asked if he could meet David Koch, the host of *Sunrise*: “Tell the fat bastard I want him here when I come out – I’ve got something for him,” Russell said (Wright, 2006b, p. 279). The miner already felt a connection with Koch from years of watching *Sunrise* at the end of his night shift. “In a small life in a small town, Koch loomed large from the screen – a link to a wider, more interesting and light-filled world.” (Wright, 2006a, p. 25). On his eventual release, Russell allegedly shouted out to Koch and waved him over to the ambulance. And so, in a classic case of the journalist imposing himself into the defining moment in history, Koch jumped into the back of the ambulance with the friend he had never met, where the overwhelmed miner greeted the media celebrity with grace and good cheer and handed over his most prized possession of the moment, his miners’ identification tag<sup>2</sup>. *Sunrise* producer Mark Boland later defended Koch’s “raw emotion” and claimed the ambulance incident was spontaneous, with “no expectation beyond a meeting at some stage, anything could have happened” (quoted in Meade, 2006).

Back at Channel 9 headquarters in Sydney, Nine’s CEO Eddie McGuire watched the historic moment on a plasma screen. He stripped out of his designer corporate clothes, pulled on a weekend jumper and boots and headed for Beaconsfield in his corporate jet, turning up at the local Beaconsfield bar and setting down a tab. While McGuire is quoted as having been in Beaconsfield “to support colleagues after the death of journalist Richard Carleton at the mine site” (Westerman, 2006), rumours circulated that McGuire had already been negotiating with Australian Workers’ Union head Bill Shorten to lobby for a Nine exclusive with the miners and that when he saw Koch being welcomed into the back of Russell’s ambulance, McGuire realised he needed to go to Beaconsfield himself to counter Koch’s influence.

McGuire first appeared at Beaconsfield in a live cross to *A Current Affair* reporter Martin King at a local bar. Stepping out of the background, McGuire is seen chatting with locals, suitably dressed for the occasion. According to both Young and Meade, McGuire announced his presence at the bar by saying: "I am coming out of retirement to host one more *Footy Show* here in Beaconsfield ... Free drinks on me." (Young, 2006) Paul Leeds, media buyer Starcom executive, identified McGuire's style here as being quite different to that of other media executives because of his "on air experience ... Eddie has a high public profile rather than business profile ... That's the major difference" (Westerman, 2006), leading *The Age's* Helen Westerman to question whether Channel 7 had been outmanoeuvred by "the Eddie McGuire cult of personality" (Westerman, 2006).

McGuire's role as celebrity CEO had several implications. First, he was at once a commodity (as a celebrity) responsible for other commodities (as a CEO). He could use his celebrity to benefit the network, but the fact he was CEO also meant he could trump the other celebrities on his network. McGuire acknowledged this at the time when he said: "If it means the difference to getting a win, me doing something, you don't have to ask me twice." (Westerman, 2006) Similarly, Michael Smith, of Inside Public Relations, explained that McGuire had a big advantage over a celebrity such as *Sunrise's* Koch, in that "Eddie can do the whole box and dice. He's the boss" (Westerman, 2006). The celebrity CEO could therefore match the "power of influence" normally wielded by the celebrity with genuine economic power.

## **A Footy Show exclusive**

This meant that Todd Russell and Brant Webb would make their first media appearance a day after emerging from the mine, not on a news or current affairs program, but on McGuire's *The Footy Show*. The choice of *The Footy Show* as the frame for a live cross to Channel 9's Beaconsfield benefit concert was primarily motivated by the involvement of McGuire (both as the former host of the show and, allegedly, because part of his "rapport" with the miners was developed through trading stories about football), by the timing of the event (this was the earliest in the schedule that Nine could have arranged such a concert to be screened) and by the interests of the miners themselves (both of whom were devotees of the AFL; Beaconsfield itself is described as "a football community").

There was therefore a disjunction that the benefit concert appeared, exactly the same, on both the Australian Football League and the National Rugby League *Footy Shows*, which are screened in different states of Australia depending on which football code dominates. In different parts of the country, the event was framed by either the AFL or NRL *Footy Show* – even though the logo that appeared onstage, the presence of McGuire himself and the interests of Beaconsfield were all clearly filtered through the AFL. It was Russell and Webb's appearance on *The Footy Show*, ostensibly to thank their rescuers and Australia "for their support" (according to *A Current Affair* Host Tracey Grimshaw, quoted in Meade, 2006), that marked the most profound shift in the way Beaconsfield was reported, underscored by the fact that it was branded as "a *Footy Show* exclusive" (as announced on-air and repeated in sources such as Westerman, 2006). By appearing on *The Footy Show*, Brant and Russell became akin to any other talent appearing on the show and the story became akin to what Hirst and Patching refer to as "newstainment", the way "news information is being steadily diluted with entertainment values ... to the point that it is becoming impossible to tell where news ends and entertainment begins" (Hirst & Patching, 2005, pp. 269-270).

Before Beaconsfield, "newstainment" was the province of satire, but with Russell and Webb's appearance on *The Footy Show* the news story suddenly spilled outside the category of news and became variety. News was packaged as entertainment, as another segment of the variety show that is *The Footy Show*. The two *Footy Shows* received an audience of 1.570 million nationally



– but the ratings nonetheless serve as a reminder that this remained a news story and news values such as “proximity” came into play. The closer to Beaconsfield, the better it rated – 705,000 (1 in Melbourne), 394,000 (5 in Sydney), top 10 in Brisbane (with 201,000) and Adelaide (154,000), but only 116,000 in Perth (number 14 in the most watched programs) (all ratings sourced from Oztam). This also had the effect of subordinating news to the general principles of television (flow and delay<sup>3</sup>), where the audience’s consumption of Russell and Webb’s story was delayed (by the bidding war, by the wait for the exclusive interview) and yet flow was maintained (through the appearance on *The Footy Show*).

In many ways, this made *The Footy Show* a kind of audition piece for the miners, a way of testing whether they were “worth” the price of a big interview, how well they related to an audience and a teaser for the main event – the highly priced interview itself. As Dyer puts it:

TV producers say that it [*The Footy Show* appearance] will also be a low cost way of screen-testing the two miners to see what sort of TV talent they are and whether it will be worth paying a lot of money for exclusive rights. Tonight could show that one or both are natural TV talent ... Consider the *Footy Shows* tonight a trial run ... (Dyer, 2006)

Once again, news values were subordinated to notions of entertainment.

Furthermore, *The Footy Show* appearance prompted widespread media speculation that the miners’ future deals could be “devalued”, and therefore marked the first time the story was discussed in purely economic terms. Michael Smith, of Inside Public Relations, saw it as the right decision for the men to take: “They can’t afford to sit around for weeks, and it gets the thank-yous out of the way” (Westerman, 2006), and McGuire himself concurred when he said:

This is just an amazing story and I don’t think it devalues it at all ... To be perfectly honest (their appearance) shows what ripping blokes they are ... In the past we’ve seen people go from hero to zero in these TV bidding wars. These blokes are just natural blokes ... if they lose some money tonight [with *The Footy Show* appearance] they’re not too worried, because they’re actually coming down to raise money for their colleagues. (quoted in Holroyd, 2006)

But of course the real prize, the exclusive interview, had yet to be secured. As another newspaper journalist, *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Dominic Knight, put it in an op-ed piece on May 17: “Who wants to sell their story for \$3 million? Brant Webb and Todd Russell must feel that surviving underground for 320 hours is nothing compared to dealing with the media feeding frenzy. All the usual suspects caught the first flight down to Beaconsfield, circling like sharks at the first whiff of potential heroic rescue.” (Knightley, n.d.)

While there has always been a rivalry between Australia’s commercial television stations, in the past two years the ratings war between Channels 9 and 7 has become increasingly intense. Traditionally Nine has been virtually unassailable – as reflected by its network slogan, “Still the One” – particularly in news and current affairs, whereas Seven’s strength has come from local drama and some imported product. But the success of Seven’s morning news program *Sunrise* and its 5.30pm game-show (*Deal or No Deal*) lead-in to the news allowed Seven to wrest the lead from Nine in the latter part of 2005 (OzTam, n.d.; enews, n.d.). By 2006, this had carried over to the all-important 6.30pm current affairs arena, where Seven’s *Today Tonight* started to regularly outperform Nine’s *A Current Affair*<sup>4</sup> (Oztam, n.d.; enews, n.d.). Beaconsfield further highlighted Nine’s slip in the ratings when Seven, together with the other commercial network, Ten, and multicultural broadcaster SBS and public broadcaster ABC, voted against Nine being the pool broadcaster at Beaconsfield<sup>5</sup>.

Thus there was more than one rescue going on at Beaconsfield; Eddie McGuire saw a Beaconsfield exclusive as potentially rescuing the Nine network itself. As Dominic Knight said: “*The*

*Footy Show* raised millions of dollars for Beaconsfield, but at the same time rescued another dire charity case, Nine's ratings," with Knight cynically going on to suggest that: "This could provide the network with a successful new direction. Wherever there's a disaster, Eddie should fly in, buy a round and raise money in a special charity edition of TV's least sensitive show." More particularly, media analyst Steve Allen described the Beaconsfield exclusive as the "circuit breaker to bring people, the public, back to realising that Nine are number one in current affairs and news" (Glanville, 2006).

The news story had shifted from the rescued miners to the new and desperate media race to secure the exclusive television interview and, as noted at the outset of this article, this was confirmed during *The Footy Show* with the following exchange at the end of the miners' thankyou speech:

Eddie McGuire: Todd, I've gotta ask you though – I'd get sacked as the journo – I'd have to front the CEO tomorrow if I didn't ask you a question about what it was like down in that mine.

Todd Russell: Listen mate – Tell me how big your chequebook is and we'll talk.

Brant Webb: Fair call.

[Eddie smiles and laughs, crowd applauds and cheers.]

The following Tuesday the wait was over – after a brief bidding war between Nine, Seven and various agencies, McGuire's chequebook proved to be the biggest: the miners, represented by 22 Management's Sean Anderson, finally signed with Channel 9 and PBL in an exclusive deal estimated to be worth between \$2.6 and \$3 million<sup>6</sup>. The interview aired as a two-hour special entitled *The great escape* from 8.30pm to 10.30pm on Sunday, May 21, 2006, hosted by *A Current Affair* presenter Tracy Grimshaw and complemented by exclusive interviews in PBL-owned magazines – *Woman's Day*, the *Australian Women's Weekly* and *The Bulletin*. The miners were also expected to receive additional income after negotiating interviews on American ABC network's *Good Morning America* and *Primetime* programs, with potential multi-million dollar book and movie rights deals expected in the US (although, ultimately, these never materialised)<sup>7</sup>.

Having signed on the dotted line with Nine and PBL, Russell and Webb and their families were immediately quarantined from all other Australian media outlets. Plans for Russell's mother to appear at Channel 7's *Sunrise* fundraising concert were quashed by Nine, and all members of the Russell and Webb families were banned from attending the live broadcast. Russell was even prevented from inviting *Sunrise* hosts to his home for a farewell morning tea and told in no uncertain terms that Nine would tear up its deal if he did so.

Despite David Koch's trip in the back of the ambulance with Russell, McGuire's offer had secured the deal for Nine. The multimillion dollar question was whether Nine could recoup its money as well as the substantial costs of its news and *A Current Affair* coverage in Beaconsfield – not to mention *The Footy Show* concert.

They did so, in part, by relying on the publishing arm of PBL. ACP published the miners' story in *The Bulletin*, deciding that the story was too "blokey" for *Woman's Day*. *The Bulletin* was to be printed on the Sunday evening to coincide with the television special and would be on the newsstands the next day, while *Woman's Day*, which would tell the female story of the disaster with interviews with the miners' families, would also be printed on the Sunday for sale on Monday morning. Ultimately, the miners featured in three cover stories in *The Bulletin* and a cover feature each in *Woman's Day* and *Australian Women's Weekly*.

Nine's usual advertising rates for a half-minute spot advertisement on Sunday were just under \$75,000 for advertisements screened during crime show *CSI* and about \$50,000 for *CSI Miami*.

That is a range of around \$90,000 to \$145,000 or so a minute. On the night the Beaconsfield interview was to run, the media conglomerate doubled its usual advertising rates, lifting them to \$100,000 for a 30-second spot for the *CSI Miami* timeslot (Great sums of money, n.d.). As Phillips notes: "With 24 minutes of commercials screened during the two-hour program, the network is expected to rake in at least \$4.5 million." (Phillips, 2006)

## **"The great escape" interview**

The choice of title for the exclusive, *The great escape*, was interesting. Allegedly derived from a comment by Bill Shorten<sup>8</sup>, "escape" rather than the more accurate "rescue" had the added commercial benefit of placing agency in the hands of the miners themselves rather than the rescuers, perhaps justifying the exclusive interview with the miners (and therefore the exclusion of the rescuers<sup>9</sup>). *The great escape* theme was maintained through the headline on *The Bulletin* (May 16, 2006), through Nine and PBL's reportage of the event and throughout the rest of the media coverage (for example, *The Mercury*, May 22, 2006). The first *Bulletin* story, "Day of reckoning", mapped the way the stories would run, moving from a consideration of the union/safety/mine issues to focus on the miners themselves; the repackaging/additional cover of the magazine "The great escape" (rather than the original cover title "Man made disaster") reflected the change in focus, while the substitution of "Souvenir edition" for "Special edition" marked the change in the way the news story would subsequently be reported. This also allowed the miners to be folded into discourses of heroism and mateship, both by Channel 9 and by the Australian Government at a lavish reception in Canberra on May 29, 2006, for the miners and their rescuers. Endless reports refer to the "million-dollar mine heroes", but, as Tom notes, this is "a dumb idea. Surviving two dark weeks of defecating into a helmet in an oozing subterranean crevice doesn't make you heroic. Inventive, resilient and phenomenally lucky, maybe, but not heroic" (Tom, 2006). Both miners acknowledged this at the Parliamentary reception, where Webb (forgetting his script) stated that: "We're not heroes of course. The people that saved us are the heroes" and Russell agreed, saying that "they're the true heroes".

But Nine had made a substantial investment, and *The great escape* interview would have to live up to the hype, regardless of what the miners had to say. So did Nine get their money's worth? According to eNews, in a story headlined "Miners, Grimshaw bring home the bacon for Nine", the show drew enough viewers to make it worthwhile, but perhaps not quite as many as Nine would have wanted: "The program peaked at 3.037 million: Seven's *Dancing with the stars* from memory peaked at 3.07 million. The audience in Melbourne averaged 883,000 compared to Sydney's 786,000."

Todd Russell was sardonic, Brant Webb was a soft-edged joker. What did the public learn that they didn't already know? That they were prepared to cut off each other's legs, and that Russell touched the hand of the man who first found them. Then there were their accounts of writing letters to loved ones on sweat-soaked arms and scraps of cardboard, the laconic humour that then Prime Minister John Howard referred to as being indicative of their Aussie mateship. As one commentator put it: "They were clearly the best sort of down-to-earth blokes." And for the first time the audience learned that it was not a big rock above them but, in their words, a whole lot of rocks, small and medium. The audience also learned how desperate their predicament was in the day or so after the collapse, with both men partly covered by rocks and dirt and having to dig themselves out (led by Webb). But absent were the still images they had taken of themselves underground; they were being kept for the book, which subsequently was released as *Bad ground* (Wright, 2006b).

Nine had its scoop, and recovered its costs. The miners made money by telling their remarkable story of survival to the world. The audience found out just what had gone on underground.



But many media analysts remained concerned by the continuing domination of chequebook journalism in big human-interest stories in Australian news.

## **Chequebook journalism – the dilemma**

A question that often arises in discussions about chequebook journalism is whether the media that miss out on an exclusive begin to see a once desirable news commodity in a different light. Some argue that, as in any commercial transaction, the party that misses out on a lucrative deal feels betrayed and this sense of betrayal can be reflected in the angle taken on the news story. The competitive nature of journalism means that every journalist wants to be the one to get the exclusive, the scoop, and when they miss out, the object of their news interest starts to very quickly wane. For the accidental celebrity, their 15 minutes of fame has started ticking down ...

Clause 7 of the MEAA AJA Code of Ethics acknowledges the practice by media companies of paying for interviews, pictures, information or stories and does not preclude chequebook journalism – although the 1990s Review Committee recommended the automatic disclosure of payments to sources (Ethics Review Committee, 1997, p. 40). In relation to “non-celebrities who are associated with a newsworthy event, often a tragedy”, the category into which both Russell and Webb clearly fall, the Review Committee also raised the question of whether “so long as other relevant ethical standards are met, have people a right, in effect, to ‘commodify their suffering’?” (Ethics Review Committee, 1997, p. 40).

The Australian Press Council is currently considering questions arising from chequebook journalism. According to APC industry member Chris McLeod (2005), “the chequebook carries the day, sadly, usually at the expense of good journalism”.

The argument against chequebook journalism suggests that paying someone to tell their story can encourage them to distort the truth. The accidental celebrity who is thrust into the public spotlight through triumph or tragedy may feel obliged to embellish their story, or they may feel pressured to exaggerate or lie about their story to make it more newsworthy or sensational because they feel a certain obligation to the people who are paying them.

One of the most serious concerns about chequebook journalism is that criminals – or suspected criminals – could profit from selling their stories to the media. When security guard Karen Brown allegedly shot and killed a man in 2004 after he attacked and robbed her, *Today Tonight* offered her \$100,000 for an exclusive interview. Brown, who was later charged with murder, spoke to the TV program before being formally interviewed by police. This prompted the then-Director of Public Prosecutions, Nicholas Cowdrey, QC, to attack “chequebook journalism”, saying it was interfering with justice (Connolly, 2004).

In Britain in 2003, five men charged with plotting to kidnap Victoria Beckham walked free after it emerged that a witness at the trial had been paid for feeding news to a British newspaper. British judge Simon Smith said the case highlighted the detrimental effect that “chequebook journalism” might have on prosecutions (Connolly, 2004). According to the UK’s PressWise (now MediaWise), “enticing people to supply ‘exclusive’ information with offers of large sums of money is a pernicious corruption of the notion of press freedom, especially since the primary purpose is usually to boost the circulation/profits of a newspaper – or in this case a television company” (PressWise Online, 2006). PressWise argues that the purchase of an “exclusive” which has the effect of restricting access to important information or limiting the choice of the public should be avoided. Crikey.com.au’s Stephen Mayne similarly claims Australian journalism is being compromised by chequebook journalism. Mayne, the founder of one of Australia’s most successful independent media outlets, is well known for exposing and discrediting what he calls a “grubby” practice. He says chequebook journalism is a major corrupting influence on the Australian media,

and that the practice leads to compromised interviews, where journalists who have access to paid talent do not ask all of the tough questions. He says: “You see chequebook journalism distorting court processes, criminals and dodgy characters profiting from it and being paid.” Mayne argues that chequebook journalism corrupts the public interest function of journalism: “Independent journalism and good journalism is not compromised. It’s not bought and it’s not sold. I do think it’s inappropriate and the media industry, particularly the television stations, should get together and ban it.” (Lanigan et al, 2006) That is what TV networks did in the US following President Richard Nixon’s accusations during the Watergate scandal that people attacked him on TV only because they were being paid to do so. The network bosses issued an edict – no more payment for people being interviewed for news or current affairs programs (Knightley, n.d.). The opposite appears to be the case in the UK, where all broadcasters, including the BBC, pay for interviews with experts – not only on current affairs programs but also on news programs.

Ironically, one of the Western world’s most respected journalists, Philip Knightley, argues that chequebook journalism is not the danger some claim, and that in fact it is only fair to pay the source of an interview when “everyone in the studio (is) being paid except the one person without whom there would be no programme” (Knightley, n.d.). Knightley claims that: “In Britain, France, Germany – all over Europe in fact – television pays people for interviews whether they be for news, current affairs, chat programmes or documentaries. If they want you they pay you, and the more desperately they want you the more they pay.” (It should be noted, however, that Knightley’s comments were precipitated by his own fury at an American TV producer refusing to pay him for an interview with the response: “American TV companies have banned ‘chequebook’ journalism.”) Knightley argues that it is “impossible to lay down hard and fast rules about chequebook journalism because journalism is an anarchic calling”. He says: “The truth is that some of the best journalism – if you dig a little behind the scenes – turns out to have a chequebook element to it. In an ideal world everyone who gave information to journalists would do so for altruistic motives. But life today is not like that. Information is a valuable commodity and in a market-oriented world journalists sometimes have to pay for it.” (Knightley, n.d.) In 1993, Knightley admitted that he paid a Soviet air force general £2000 for the story of his role in the Cuban missile crisis 30 years earlier; and he also paid £500 to a KGB colonel for a copy of the file of Sidney Reilly (of “Reilly Ace of Spies” TV fame). But he did not pay a cent to British spy Kim Philby for six days of interviews in Moscow in 1988: “Because I told him that if I paid him I would have to announce it and then no British newspaper would print the story – ‘blood money to British traitor.’ Philby understood.”

One of the strongest arguments against chequebook journalism is that the wealthiest media organisations will monopolise the news and secure the rights to the best stories. Knightley admits this is so, saying that in Britain it is well-known that the Mail organisation and the Murdoch group pay the most and the Guardian and the Independent groups the least, so anyone with a story to sell – unless they are ideologically motivated – goes to the Mail or Murdoch. “You cannot buck the market [...] And let us not forget that this is the great information age. Why should journalism alone be banned from trading in it?” (Knightley, n.d.)

## Conclusion

What makes Beaconsfield a unique event in the evolution of chequebook journalism in Australia is the way it was so openly referred to on *The Footy Show* – and the reaction it produced from the audience. Former *Sydney Morning Herald* editor David Bowman criticised the 1944 AJA Code of Ethics for its failure to deal with public concerns about privacy and chequebook journalism. But at the same time, he suggested that journalists “have no choice but to abide, by and large, by ethics accepted by the public” (Bowman, 1983, p. 37). What then are we to make of the public’s ethics following the audience response to Russell’s comment about McGuire’s

“chequebook” with, as Tom describes it, “an almighty cheer”? (Tom, 2006). While Dale suggests the motivation for this response might have been that “the audience was made up of Beaconsfielders who relished the thought of a couple of local lads screwing big media types from the mainland” (Dale, 2006), it seems more likely that when Russell articulated his desire to make some serious money from his and Webb’s extraordinary story of survival, the Australian public realised that winning Lotto was not the only way for ordinary citizens to make millions – as long as they had an extraordinary story set in the context of a ratings war, they also had the opportunity to make, in accountancy terminology, substantial wealth growth.

Another question that Beaconsfield raises is what is actually being commodified – the “suffering” (the story) or the miners themselves? Russell lashed out at cameramen while attending a Bridgenorth Parrots football game in northern Tasmania asking them to “leave me alone ... have some respect”, and Meade and Rintoul suggest that for Russell, “selling his story for millions means he has no privacy, not so soon after Australia has claimed him as the embodiment of courage, not so soon after he has become public property”, referring to the miners as “the most sought-after media commodity on, it would seem, the planet” (Meade & Rintoul, 2006). Through the commodification of their stories, Russell and Webb have themselves become commodities, and “celebrities” too: they appear in a song on the Foo Fighters’ latest album and most recently appeared, as celebrities, to endorse Bill Shorten as a Labor candidate.

In all of these ways Beaconsfield marks an important point in the evolution of chequebook journalism in Australia and the increasing subordination of news values to the demands of entertainment. Although Russell and Webb have slipped out of the headlines and the Beaconsfield mine disaster has, more or less, played itself out as a news story, the repercussions of how Beaconsfield was reported will linger with us for some time to come.

## Notes

1. Crikey.com.au notes that “the Beaconsfield story really broke at the worst time for newspapers” (Simons, Newhouse & Crikey correspondents, 2006).
2. This is an important turning point in the Beaconsfield story, in terms of the ethical questions it raises, the importance of celebrity and the resulting appearance of McGuire on the scene. Koch described the event himself on *Sunrise* when he answered a message from a viewer who described the act as “disgusting”. Koch replied: “You’ll be waiting for a long time mate, if you want an apology ... Look, I might be a boofhead sometimes, but I’m not a big enough boofhead that I’d jump a fence and jump into an ambulance uninvited ... Basically, the story behind it is that we have got to know Todd’s family pretty well because they’re all big *Sunrise* fans and Todd’s a huge *Sunrise* fan, as were many of the rescue workers, and he would send up messages to us through the rescue workers and we would send replies back and the day before yesterday he sent a message saying ‘tell that fat ugly so and so ... to be at the gate when I come out in the ambulance’.” (quoted in Meade & Rintoul, 2006) Koch tells a similar story in his appearance on the ABC’s satirical news series *The Glass House* and it is confirmed in Wright (2006b, p. 278). Wright also implies that the real turning point was the death of Richard Carleton (see below).
3. Flow and delay are derived from the notion that television is a commodity that is never completely consumed. Flow is maintained through scheduling, advertising and narrative structure encouraging audiences to continue their consumption from one moment to the next. But complete consumption is indefinitely delayed by commercials, narrative developments and scheduling.

4. For example, according to the OzTam ratings during the Beaconsfield event, on Wednesday, May 10, 2006, Seven's *Today Tonight* was the most-watched program of the night with 1.741 million viewers, almost half a million more than *ACA*'s 1.32 million. Seven News came second with 1.653 million, to Nine's 1.349 million. That morning, Seven's *Sunrise* earned 549,000, well ahead of Nine's *Today* with 266,000 viewers. On Monday, *Sunrise* earned 544,000 viewers to *Today*'s 368,000. On Tuesday (the day the miners were released), *Sunrise* earned 839,000 compared with *Today*'s 529,000 and Channel Ten's morning news 50,000. At one point, *Sunrise*'s figures peaked at 1.02 million, close to three times the normal peak for that time of day (all figures from OzTam and enews).
5. Ironically, in accordance with police rules, the actual moment the miners were released was covered by a single TV camera and one stills photographer.
6. While the final figure remains unclear – most estimates place it at \$2.6 million – one would assume it would actually be in excess of the \$2.75 million offered by Seven and *New Idea* (see Healey, 2006).
7. For more detail on Beaconsfield as a media event see Bainbridge (2008).
8. Shorten is credited with telling the Nine Network, following Russell and Webb's release: "The great escape is over ... a giant rock of pressure has been taken off these families." (Rycroft, 2006).
9. One of the few places the rescuers did appear was on ABC's *The 7.30 Report*, where Peter Hatswell from NSW Mines Rescue Service was interviewed by Paul Lockyer (Lockyer 2006), and in *The Age* (Miner's tale from the bowels of the earth, May 13, 2006). The rescuers are given some more attention in Wright (2006) and were featured on a 2007 episode of *Australian Story*. Larry Knight's family was also featured on an episode of the series.

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